

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## Dedications and Illuminations: The Life Work of Syd Harrex

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*Dedicated to Jane and Jaime,  
and to the friends and colleagues around the world who worked with Syd Harrex to establish the  
CRNLE*

*Transnational Literature*, as its many contributors and readers will already know, is an open-access journal that was established in 2008 by the then Flinders Humanities Research Centre, under the editorship of Dr Gillian Dooley, and has come out regularly every 6 months since. It now has an international team of 10 editors.

Every issue broadens the journal's reach. Nearly 60 residents of 15 countries have contributed to the latest issue, each telling a transnational story in prose or poetry, or contributing to a vast international literary conversation about writing across countries and cultures. *Transnational Literature* is a journal with a truly international reputation.

After the tenth issue was published in 2013, a major survey of the number of downloads showed that to date the 607 full text articles had been downloaded 245,663 times. A more limited survey done recently showed that 61 major articles from the past 6 issues (peer-reviewed articles, review essays etc.) had been downloaded an average of 466 times each. Naturally these numbers increase with time: the papers from May 2014 have each been downloaded nearly 800 times each. These figures don't include the dozens of poems, stories, creative non-fiction and book reviews that enrich every issue.

The continuing success of the journal is in no small part down to the vision of Dr Syd Harrex, a foundation member of the Flinders University English staff (1966) and the founding Director of the Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English (CRNLE; established 1977). The *CRNLE Reviews Journal* began in 1979. That journal was the direct ancestor of *Transnational Literature*, so without the pioneering work of our genial, unassuming and dedicated late colleague, *Transnational Literature* would not exist.

Tasmanian-born poet and scholar Syd Harrex was a widely published author of books and essays on postcolonial new literatures, but is perhaps most lauded for co-founding the CRNLE, the first centre in the world dedicated to promoting the literatures of India, the Caribbean, Malaysia, Singapore, the South Pacific Islands and Australasia. Syd's innovative vision, always illuminated by his generosity and passion to involve people in what is still an exciting and vital field of Humanities research, led him to take risks that would have long-term significance for all *Transnational Literature* contributors and readers. In a recent festschrift dedicated to Syd, editor and former student Ron Blaber put in context his mentor's contribution to the Humanities:

A key moment in the history of CRNLE occurs 2 years after its foundation: 1979 sees the appearance of the *CRNLE Reviews Journal*. The Journal is typical of the

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creativity and risk taking associated with the Centre. A reviews journal, dedicated to reviewing new writing, both creative and critical, is a risk because one can never be sure whether it will find a niche in a saturated academic-journal market, or, for that matter, find contributors willing to give up time to review material. The reviews journal met with remarkable success, running from 1979 through to 1995.<sup>1</sup>

The journal continued in various guises (as the *CRNLE Journal* and then the e-journal *Quodlibet*) and finally developed into *Transnational Literature* in 2008. In this special issue of *Transnational Literature* we celebrate Syd's life work, and include new essays that speak to his legacy, as well as reprints of Syd's scholarly criticism, and evaluations of his poetry by other New Literatures scholars.

We begin with a reminiscence of Syd by friend and fellow postcolonial scholar, Dieter Riemenschneider. Two articles then explore the culturally-contested spaces of India: Sukanya Mondal and Rashmi Gaur offer a reading of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* in terms of the subaltern's relation to development, and Susan Hosking explores her Indian connections (and the slightly macabre phenomenon of 'graving') in a cultural history of the South Park Street Cemetery in Kolkata. Creative pieces by Lyn Jacobs, Ioana Petruscu and Chris Sherrah, Michael X. Savvas, and Alexander Opicho follow in Part Two. Lyn's poem gently captures Syd's conviviality and the importance of his songs in bringing people together at the beautiful Flinders bushland campus. Ioana and Chris explore in their poetic-photographic essay the islandic identities of the Sumatrans, and sensitively reveal to us the developed world's complex and fragile connections to the animals and the people they encounter on their visit to Sumatra. Michael X. Savvas honours Syd's irreverent sense of humour in his equally irreverent piece that combines anecdotes, poems and short stories. Alexander Opicho's poems show the sort of creative chaos that marks one of Syd's favourite novels, Desani's *All about H. Hatter*. Opicho's exuberant language always threatens to break the narrative threads of the poems – a language he describes as 'cacotopian.'

The third part of the special issue features reprints of essays by Syd Harrex, and review essays about Syd by Sudesh Mishra and Anne Collett. The final part is dedicated to Syd's poetry: a selection of Syd's published poems reveals a long-term passion for the Australian landscape and for friendship, and some of his later poems are also published here for the first time – a timely tribute to the poet and scholar who helped to shape the research direction of Flinders University in its early years. A reprinted essay by the editors complements this section, and stands as an insight into Syd's later poetic practice.

Within these pages you will find an eclectic mix of contributions that explore the current interstices of New Literatures research: collectively the contributors speak to Syd's broad interests in islandic identity, the postcolonial voice, travel, conviviality and song. The personal tributes to Syd illustrate a life defined by art, friendship, generosity and an always-inquiring mind.

In many ways, the editors of this special issue have come to understand Syd's life work in the New Literatures in English through his poetic oeuvre. As transcribers of his late poems, we worked closely with his words. His poems are shot through with post-colonial and modernist

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<sup>1</sup> Ron Blaber (ed), 'Whaddaya Know?:' *Writings for Syd Harrex* (Mile End: Wakefield Press, 2015), 2-3.

insights and interventions, and it is through these poems that we would like to introduce (or reacquaint) you with our friend and mentor.

*Molly:* When the wattle flowers begin to light up winter, generous and yellow, I think of Syd—poet, scholar, teacher, mentor, dear friend—for the colour ‘gold’ finds its way into so many of his poems. Born in July, the flowering wattle, too, heralds his birthday (in the southern hemisphere at least). When Syd died last year it was autumn, the ‘willow yellow time of year’.<sup>2</sup> It is no surprise that I have these specific visual associations when it comes to Syd and the colours of his poems. He was a man who paid deep attention—not only to the vivid world around him, but also to his friends and loved ones. Eyes wide open. Syd had a keen inner compass; a poet’s insight and sensitivity. And now that he is fleshly gone, his words float unbidden across my mind. Talismans. I see wattle and think of Syd’s ‘favourite desperate colours’.<sup>3</sup> And last year, when visiting Tasmania, the crown of Mt Wellington looming at the end of a Hobart street, it is Syd’s sacred mountain of childhood, his ‘private anthem’<sup>4</sup> that I encountered. His poems penetrate for they are deeply abiding. And it is comfort to still hear his voice in his words. Dear Syd, ‘the sky is in your voice.’

*Melinda:* And then there are the phases of the year that were for Syd ‘all a green willow,’ the seasons of spring and summer that herald the changeover from Aussie Rules football to cricket. For Syd, the memories of childhood in Tasmania were shaped by the inevitable rhythms of the sporting seasons, and his passion for sport – its sensuous colours, sounds and smells – informed his understanding of the ways in which poetry might illuminate and sustain everyday life. It would be at this time of the year, when the undergraduate semester was over, that we would often sit together in the late-afternoon at the university bar, and watch the events of a test match unfold, slowly. A poem or two would emerge between innings. The rhythms and also the precision of the game appealed to Syd. In his practice as a poet he sought the dexterity, discipline and dedication of the athlete, and he taught me the importance when reading and writing critically of ‘getting your eye in,’ a term essential to both cricketer and author.

We begin this dedication, then, with two poems that illuminate Syd’s life-long commitment to celebrating Australian landscapes, natural and cultural, in water colour words.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Syd Harrex, ‘Dejection Dream Song’ in *Five Seasons*, edited by Melinda Graefe and Molly Murn (Bedford Park: Table One, 2011), 32.

<sup>3</sup> Harrex, ‘A Stranger to Myself’ in *In the Half-Light* (unpublished manuscript)

<sup>4</sup> Harrex, ‘Back in Tassie’ in *Five Seasons*, 61.

<sup>5</sup> We wish to acknowledge Anna Rutherford, Michael Bollen and Michael Deves (Wakefield Press and Lythrum Press), and P. Lal (Writers Workshop) who published Syd Harrex’s poems in beautiful volumes over the many years. ‘Ballooning above Vineyards’ is a recent, unpublished poem, and ‘All a Green Willow’ was initially published in *Quadrant*, and reprinted in *Inside Out* (Kent Town: Wakefield Press, 1991), 19.

## **Ballooning above Vineyards**

Foetus floating  
in the cloud-lined  
womb, air currents  
flowing like blood  
through gently pulsing veins.  
Why then momentarily  
with our sense of panic  
indulge in a fanciful  
question, why then cease  
to float, to drift back  
down on the gently rising  
merciful meadow  
in the silence of air  
currents on a windless afternoon.  
Gravity is arrested  
like a wattle in full  
flowering, or the hawk  
up here, floating,  
circling, reconnoitring  
perhaps suspiciously or  
merely curiously.  
Wisps of air not yet clouds  
feather your face, part  
your hair, as you listen  
to the softest of symphonies.

## **All a Green Willow**

A boy's year like mind  
had just two seasons:  
Aussie Rules and Cricket.

The discovery of girls  
and swimming after tennis  
also glowed with summer good,

but the time on which I gloat  
is saturated by the smell  
of linseed oil in willow wood.  
Rich then and complex now  
the leather rush of red, the race  
across the stain of green:

They helped me read a poem's  
beauty through, see its stumps of birth  
and death, with life running in-between.